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ABSTRACT

A 2-day conference on teaching moral values in American schools resulted in a report called "Moral Education and Character" which highlights the views of participants from a variety of fields. This brief paper is a synopsis of the issues and arguments presented in that report. Moral education concerns learning about good conduct. It is about the development of character, the stable qualities of a person that are revealed in his or her actions. Parents are the first moral educators of a child. Teachers also play a major role in moral education once a child begins school. Certain qualities of character and action, such as honesty, are universally accepted. Such features of morality are so taken for granted that people tend to focus on the controversial aspects, such as the role religion should or should not play in moral education and overlook what everyone accepts. The Supreme Court has made a constitutional distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion. The latter is constitutional, but in practice, it may be difficult to do one and not the other. Moral education can be introduced into the school curriculum in a number of ways: (1) through a distinct course or classroom activity, (2) as a part of a literature course, or (3) in cooperative learning activities, to name a few. There are many questions in this area that might be addressed by future research. For example: (1) What values do all hold in common, and what differences exist among moral viewpoints? (2) What types of moral education, if any, are individual teachers practicing in schools today? (3) What are the effects of religious heritage on moral education? and (4) Is there a role for the federal government in this area at all? (JB)

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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Reflections on Moral Education

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Research in Brief

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Reflections on Moral Education

Inevitably, moral education is part of the normal school day. Students and teachers trust one another to prepare for and attend class so that they can learn together. The school requires obedience to the rules so that activities can be conducted. A teacher breaks up a fight on the playground, and later tells his class about when he was a child and saw his father stop a fight, and how he felt proud of his father's action.

Since the founding of our Republic, people have debated about how children should be taught moral values, who should teach them, and what values should be taught. In an effort to focus the debate and encourage further research on moral education in America's schools, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) brought together scholars from diverse disciplines for a 2-day conference on this issue. The resulting report, *Moral Education and Character*, highlights the varied views of participants from the fields of psychology, education, history, sociology, philosophy, and literature. A synopsis of the issues and arguments follows.

What Is Moral Education?

Moral education concerns learning about good conduct. It is about the development of character, the stable qualities of a person that are revealed in his or her actions. Not surprisingly, the issue of which aspects of character and good conduct children should learn topped the conference agenda.

Frequently, people adopt a simplistic view of morality. They think it only concerns lying, sexual misbehavior, and cheating. But one conferee suggested that moral judgments are manifest in almost every action we take. Such judgments are expressed in what he termed the "voices of conscience."

These voices speak to all aspects of everyday human conduct, not just to those traditionally linked with moral behavior. The voice of craft, for instance, suggests that tasks such as mowing the lawn or writing a good sentence are ordinary activities involving standards of right and wrong—doing the task well or doing it poorly. It is a mark of character whether the individual takes care to perform such everyday actions well. If we present morality or ethics to children in ways that include this sort of performance, then moral education and conduct become a constant concern, not one restricted to occasional momentous decisions.

Who Teaches Moral Education?

Parents are the first moral educators of a child. One conferee suggested that the parent, as moral educator, should be sensitive to the developmental aspects of moral education, and that different kinds of moral explanations make sense to children at different stages of maturity.

Parents can foster respect in their children by doing such things as giving everyone a chance to be heard in a given situation. Indeed, moral education is often taught by example. Settling a conflict involves not only determining what is the best resolution, but also showing children how people should treat one another fairly in the process.

Parents can also teach moral standards to their children by telling them directly what is right and wrong. They might talk with their children about the moral aspects of given actions and encourage them to think about moral questions. One panelist referred to research showing that children who feel obliged to follow through on their moral judgments are generally those whose parents have strong feelings about ethical conduct and express moral indignation or disappointment when their children act incorrectly.

Teachers also play a major role in moral education once a child begins school. By word and deed they serve as moral models for children, extending the adult influence over the child that began with parents. One conferee described the teacher's role as one which stimulates thought about moral issues, so that children may develop a capacity for critically judging their actions and those of others, and thus gain an enhanced ability to act correctly.

Additionally, teachers and parents can cooperate with each other in the moral education of children. Through direct involvement in school life, parents have a number of avenues to pursue in extending their role as moral educators beyond the circle of family.

Must Everyone Agree About What Is Moral?

What is to be done if parents disagree with each other, or with teachers, about exactly what standards of right and wrong children should learn? One panelist argued that neither the public schools, the Federal government, nor the social majority is entitled to impose a specific view of morality on children of dissenting parents. Another contended that because of the diversity among the American people, public schools can provide a rich environment in which to exchange and experience different views and share experiences.

All the conferees, however, agreed that certain qualities of character and action are universally accepted and beyond question. Honesty, for example, is something no one denies we ought to encourage in our children. We may appeal to different sources in explaining why honesty is called for, but we all call for it. The true issue is how to instill honesty in a child, not whether such a virtue should be acquired. Certain features of morality are so taken for granted that people tend to focus on the controversial aspects, such as the role religion should or should not play in moral education, and overlook what everyone accepts.

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What Is the Role of Religion in Moral Education at School?

Many religions are practiced in the United States, and opinions about the proper role of religion in moral education are as diverse as they are complex. While participants acknowledged that public and private schools face different kinds of issues, they generally agreed that religious convictions have a bearing on moral convictions, and thus are a natural part of discussions about moral education. The conferees noted that controversy over religion could easily become a source of concern, but they also realized that ignoring religion makes no sense.

In their discussions, panelists identified a number of ways in which religion might legitimately appear in public schools, since the Supreme Court has made a Constitutional distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion. Teaching *about* religion is Constitutional, but in practice it may be difficult to do one and not the other.

No position is without controversy. At the same time, however, none of the participants was prepared to recommend resolving the problem by trying to avoid it.

Do We Need a Moral Education Curriculum?

One way of presenting moral issues is through a distinct course or classroom activity. Addressing moral questions in this direct manner is the most obvious method of providing moral education. However, several of the conferees suggested that moral questions might best be introduced and discussed in the course of teaching other subjects, such as history or literature.

Literature, they contended, is extraordinarily well suited to conveying the complexity of moral questions, because great literary works present moral issues with richness and subtlety. Literature also provides students an opportunity to think about moral dilemmas they have yet to confront, thus giving them experiences beyond themselves.

Other conferees pointed to research evidence which suggests that substantial and worthwhile positive results are not achieved by a single curricular program or a single classroom strategy. Instead, they advocated a variety of new approaches that have been developed and proven effective in teaching moral education. "Cooperative learning," which groups students into teams for learning activities, and the "just community approach," in which teachers and students set school rules democratically, were two of the researched moral education strategies discussed by the conferees.

What Can Research Contribute?

Throughout the conference, speculation persisted about the nature of future research on moral education and what educators might gain from such research. One conferee recommended research into the depth of consensus among Americans about values generally. What do we all hold in common? and What differences exist among moral viewpoints? are questions asked repeatedly.

Another participant recommended research into what types of moral education, if any, individual teachers are practicing in the schools today. Participants also wanted to know more about the effects of religious heritage on moral education. And they wondered how religious convictions influence the moral actions of parents, teachers, and students.

Yet others expressed strong concerns about whether there is a role for the Federal government in the area at all. They warned that the use of measurement research in moral education might invite some policymakers to make claims that Texas students, for instance, score higher than Florida students on the moral scale.

Copies of *Moral Education and Character* are available for $1.75 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402. Ask for stock number 065–000–00381–3. You may pay by check or money order (payable to the Superintendent of Documents), VISA, or MasterCard.

You may also obtain additional information on this topic by visiting your local library or an Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) service provider. For further information about the nearest ERIC provider, call 1–800–424–1616.

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